

Wild Bird Rescue

Handling and First Aid Guidelines



PRACTICAL LEAFLET

4



General Information

This leaflet is intended for volunteers in the Falkland Islands who may need to handle or attempt to clean, injured or oiled birds. It should be remembered that handling a bird, unless it is essential for the well being of the bird, is an offence under Falklands law and can carry a fine of up to £2000. By following these basic guidelines, volunteers should be able to:

- ▶ Help relieve the suffering of injured birds
- ▶ Clean and provide first aid to oiled birds
- ▶ Assist in the rehabilitation of oiled seabirds.

Falklands Conservation can provide assistance, equipment, advice and training and is always interested to hear of any injured or oiled birds in the Islands.

Unless you are used to handling large birds (eg albatross seen left), it is best to call an expert rescuer to the bird rather than try to capture it yourself



REMEMBER!

- ▶ Birds can be aggressive, especially larger species. Be careful of injury from beaks, talons or flippers.
- ▶ Never hold a captive bird near to your face.
- ▶ Reduce stress by keeping quiet and calm.
- ▶ Put the bird in a dark, quiet and secure place as soon as possible.
- ▶ Never intervene if you are in any doubt about the necessity.
- ▶ Never handle a bird unless you feel comfortable and are prepared
- ▶ Never force birds towards the sea or open water.
- ▶ Record your actions / observations, with photographs if possible.
- ▶ Seek advice if you are in any doubt about what to do.
- ▶ Obtain help from the vets or FC as soon as possible.

Insurance

Falklands Conservation's insurance cover extends only to volunteers directly involved in events and conservation work organised and supervised by Falklands Conservation. It is essential that if individuals organise their own events, or conduct their own practical conservation work, they undertake an assessment and take precautions to ensure their own safety, that of other people who may be involved, and if appropriate, the public. If in doubt, seek advice from Falklands Conservation.

All members of the public are responsible for their own safety. You should never undertake any task unless you are trained or feel confident to carry it out effectively and safely.

Injured Birds

There are some simple, but important, things you can do after finding an injured bird.

Before attempting to handle any wild bird always ask yourself, '*is it actually in need of assistance?*' This may be obvious, if it is tangled in litter or marine debris, or has been hit by a vehicle, but may not be so clear if suffering from a disease or poisoning. In the case of 'abandoned' young birds, always ensure that the parents are not nearby before attempting to capture. Being captured is an extremely stressful process for any wild animal - the benefits of any treatment should be weighed up against this. For instance, a bird with an injured leg is probably best left alone, whilst a wing injury is serious enough to merit capture and treatment.

Wild animals can die from stress. Continually looking at it, holding it, or trying to "comfort" it only stresses it more. Because of this, ensure you have everything needed for the bird at hand before trying to capture it.

It is usually difficult to catch an injured bird and careless handling may cause further injury. Handling must be firm but gentle. Small birds up to Falkland thrush size can be held in one hand. Place your hand over the bird so that its head fits between your forefinger and middle finger. The rest of the fingers will naturally wrap round each wing holding the bird firmly.

Medium-sized birds (eg ducks & gulls) are best held with two hands, one over each wing. Handling large birds requires great care because of risk of injury to the handler. Unless you are used to handling large birds, it is best to call an expert rescuer to the bird rather than try to capture it yourself.

First Treatment

Once you have caught the bird:

- ▶ Keep it warm, 27–32°C. Birds should never be directly heated. simply kept warm by ambient heat such as being in a shed, vehicle or back porch.
- ▶ Don't feed it or give it fluids
- ▶ Keep it in a secure, dark container, such as a cardboard box with a loose lid.
- ▶ Stay quiet around it and don't continually check on or look at the bird.
- ▶ Get it to the vet as quickly as possible.
- ▶ Never keep the bird or try to treat it yourself without seeking advice.

There are good reasons for following these basic rules. Most wildlife that is injured or sick enough to be caught is in serious trouble already. You can assume that without medical intervention the bird will die. It may be in shock, a life-threatening condition. The first avenue of treatment for shock is warmth, dark and quiet. Birds in shock may need to be stabilized by a vet.

Keeping a wild bird in the dark, quiet and alone gives it a sense of being hidden, making it feel safer. Darkness encourages young birds to sleep, slowing down their metabolism and saving precious calories.

Holding onto the bird and thinking you can treat it yourself may be a death sentence for it. Contact either **Falklands Conservation** on **22247** or the **Veterinary Department** in Stanley on **27366** for advice. Always make a note of actions and pass on your recordings to either the vets or FC as these may be very useful in the future.

Checklist

- Gloves
- Something to cut away debris if necessary, penknife or blunt-nosed sharp scissors.
- Box or container
- Towel or similar for padding
- Eye protection

Oiled Birds

The incidence of oiled seabirds in the Falklands is low, due to the oceanic nature of the waters and low shipping activity. This does not mean, however, that the risk does not exist. In recent years, about 50 penguins have been cleaned and rehabilitated for release around the Islands. In neighbouring waters, it has been estimated that 40,000 penguins die each year as a result of oil pollution¹. Many birds that are exposed to oil pollution in open waters may return to breed in the Islands and still have traces of oil present.

Seabirds such as penguins, albatross, shags and other birds which spend time at the sea surface are vulnerable to the effects of sea surface oil pollution.

Oil severely reduces the waterproofing ability of a bird's feathers, leading to hypothermia, loss of the ability to fly and subsequent drowning. Oiled birds will attempt to stay out of the water, leading to emaciation and starvation. There are toxic

effects following accidental ingestion as they try to preen the oil from their feathers. These include swelling and irritation of the stomach, haemorrhaging, anaemia, failure to breed, suppressed growth and an inability to regulate body fluids. Birds exposed to oil during the breeding season can also pass on lethal doses to embryonic chicks through the eggshell as they incubate.

Experience in the Islands that most oiled penguins can be successfully cleaned, rehabilitated and returned to the wild. Released birds often return to breed, even in the same season.

We hope that these notes will enable people to cope with rescuing an oiled bird, and increase the numbers that are returned safely to their natural environment.

¹: Gandini, P., Boersma, P.D., Frere, E., Gandini, M., T & Lichtstein, V. (1994) Magellanic Penguins (*Spheniscus magellanicus*) affected by chronic petroleum pollution along the coast of Chubut, Argentina. *Auk*, 111, 20-27.



Releasing gentoo penguins after cleansing treatment

On Finding Oiled Seabirds

Report the incident to **Falklands Conservation on 22247** and the **Veterinary Department on 27366**. Leave your name and contact number. Give details of the site, exact location and apparent condition of the animals. A Falklands Conservation representative will attend whenever possible.

If there are too many birds to deal with personally, ask for assistance and Falklands Conservation will arrange help. It is important to report any potential oil spills as soon as possible as this will also assist FIG in identifying where the oil may have come from and whether it is likely to affect birds in other areas.

Recording

Recording what you see and do is vital.

Basic information includes:

- Species and number of birds and other observations (condition, young, breeding colony etc)
- Probable source and type of oil, if known
- Time and date
- Location, by grid reference if possible
- Who is involved
- What actions are carried out
- If relevant, weather and tidal information.

Catching and Handling Oiled Birds

Generally the most commonly oiled birds in the Islands are penguins. Penguins should be handled carefully, as they can deliver a nasty bite. Ensure that the level of oiling requires treatment, as stress caused to the bird by this process is great and a small patch of oil may be better simply left. When catching, try to keep the bird away from others in the vicinity and

away from any breeding areas or nests. Approach the bird from the water side to reduce the risk of it escaping back to sea and almost certain hypothermia. Catch the bird as quickly as you can, securing the flippers and covering the eyes to prevent it becoming unduly stressed. This can be done using something as simple as a sock!

Remember that claws can do a lot of damage to hands, and that the natural reaction of the bird will be to bite its captor. Ensure you keep the beak away from your eyes, and restrain it as soon as you can do so. However, do not tape the beak closed however as this can cause the bird to choke or suffocate.

Transfer the bird in a dark container or sack to a place where it can be cleaned as quickly as possible, in a dark container / sack. Try to prevent the bird becoming too hot, and if using off road vehicles, prevent undue bumping around as this can result in further injury or stress. The easiest way to do this is for someone to sit with the bird between their legs on the floor of the vehicle and holding it upright.



An oiled rockhopper penguin prior to the clean-up process

Oiled Birds

Before starting the cleaning process, ensure you have sufficient space, plenty of warm or tepid water available, are wearing thick, waterproof clothing and have gloves. Oil can be a severe skin irritant so the use of waterproof gloves will reduce this. The process can take up to 2 hours. Afterwards the bird will need placing in a warm, dry and preferably dark place to recover.

Cleaning an Oiled Bird

The first step is to remove as much as possible of any heavy thick oil, which is lodged in the feathers. This is most easily done with a lighter oil such as cooking oil or butter. Massage it into the affected area and squeeze the feathers to mobilise and remove the contaminating oil. This may take some time.

When you think you have removed as much as you can this way, ensure the bird's feathers are thoroughly soaked with water and begin lathering with a mild detergent. Washing up liquid and shampoo have both been used effectively. It is important to

clean around the eyes and bill if the head is affected, but this should be done very carefully using cotton buds. Keep lathering and rinsing in clean water until the wash water becomes clear and there is no trace of oil or detergent coming off the bird. It can be useful to check for the smell of oil to gauge whether the bird is fully clean. It is unlikely that the feathers will look bright and clean after this as most oiling will leave a stain, but this should be pale and no oil should come out when pressure is applied to the feathers.

Gently towel-dry the bird and ensure that it is kept undisturbed in a warm dry place for at least a few hours to recover from the handling.

First Aid

A badly oiled bird will also require treatment to reduce the toxic effects of ingesting oil when preening. This needs to be carried out by a trained person, as it involves using a tube to deliver a charcoal gel solution into the stomach of the

penguin, where it will absorb any oil. The intake of water at this stage is also valuable to the bird. Because of previous oiled bird incidents, there are many people around the Islands who have experience of this procedure and Falklands Conservation will be able to help by sending a trained member of staff or volunteer to assist. The Veterinary Department provides the equipment and there are sets available to borrow in the event of an oiling incident. It may be that the bird requires charcoal over the course of a few days to ensure poisoning from the oil does not occur. It is usual, in combination with the charcoal treatment, to provide a mineral and vitamin boost up solution, also available from the Veterinary Department.

Rehabilitation

Because the main effect on any oiled bird is its loss of waterproofing, it can take a significant time following a clean-up attempt (maybe up to 2 weeks) before they are ready to be released into the wild. This means you need an area suitable for a bird to occupy, depending on the size of your patient! Cleaned out dog kennels are ideal for penguins, as they allow the bird to have shelter when they want, but also access to the wind and rain which encourages preening. When the bird's feathers are wet or it feels cold, the instinct is to preen, and by preening the bird can replace valuable lost natural oils in the

feathers, thus gradually building up the waterproofing again. Access therefore to water and the elements through this time is quite important. Feeding your patient is another consideration. Normally it is best not to feed for the first day or two to allow the charcoal treatment to pass through. After this, any fish will generally suffice and Falklands Conservation can help with sourcing and providing fish for captive birds during recovery. Squid are excellent, as are any other smallish sea fish found locally. For the first couple of feeds it may be necessary to restrain the bird and push the fish part way into the mouth, but most penguins pick up feeding time very quickly. After a few attempts, they soon realise that this is good stuff and will willingly take these out of your hand – again caution is needed! As a general guide, 50-100g of fish per 1 kg of body weight will comfortably feed an adult bird for a day. This will vary with the individual.

Assistance will be available during this time. Birds can also be sent into town where Conservation volunteers and staff, as well as the Veterinary Department, will take care of them and ensure their safe release. Alternatively, help and or equipment can be sent to you, so please do let us know if you need it.

These notes are purely for initial guidance and are not intended as a comprehensive source of information. If a bird has been oiled it is always best to seek professional advice.



A rockhopper penguin being lathered and rinsed clean. (Photo FI Veterinary Department)

REMEMBER!

- ▶ Birds bite and scratch – take care!
- ▶ Avoid skin contact with oil.
- ▶ Transport animals carefully to avoid injury.
- ▶ Use hand-warm water for cleaning to reduce shock to the bird.
- ▶ Keep birds away from face.
- ▶ Always seek advice before attempting any first aid on a wild bird.
- ▶ Keep birds warm after cleaning.

Equipment Checklist

- Towels for capture and bedding as well as transport
- Container / sack for transport to cleaning site
- Space for cleaning active bird
- Supply of warm water
- Light oil / butter
- Detergents
- Waterproof trousers and top
- Gloves
- First aid kit
- Notebook and camera to record details
- Intubation kit
- Activated charcoal gel sachets
- Warm, dry and dark kennel / large container for recovery

Falklands Conservation will provide equipment wherever possible.

FALKLANDS CONSERVATION

Offers practical support and organises clean-up of oiled birds in the Falkland Islands

Awards conservation grants for local wildlife projects

Has a well-stocked library of wildlife and conservation literature for reference

Provides advice on wildlife issues

Maintains a comprehensive Falkland Islands wildlife recording database

This leaflet is one in a series giving guidance to our members, volunteers and the public on a range of practical conservation and wildlife issues produced with financial support from the Overseas Territories Environment Programme.

Falklands Conservation has worked to protect the wildlife of the Falkland Islands for over 25 years. Based in Stanley, the charity now has over 600 members worldwide, a flourishing junior group and many volunteers. The Falkland Islands are small and remote with limited resources but with hugely important wildlife to protect. Falklands Conservation is heavily dependant on public support to fund its conservation programmes. You can help us by making a donation or by becoming a member. We welcome visitors to our offices in Stanley, or you may find out more about us on our website (below).

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